

CITY OF BELLINGHAM URBAN FOREST PLAN PHASE 3 ENGAGEMENT SUMMARY

June 2024

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for:



Executive Summary

The City of Bellingham is developing its first Urban Forest Plan (the Plan). The Plan is designed to maintain a healthy and desirable urban forest through well-coordinated, consistent, efficient, and sustainable long-term urban forestry management.

This report summarizes the results of the Phase 3 Engagement. Phase 3: Plan Development, builds upon Phase 1: Assessment, which improved understanding of existing forest conditions through detailed canopy change, forest structure, wildlife corridor, and wildland-urban interface analyses, as well as Phase 2: Community Values, which focused on understanding community priorities and values. Phase 3 public engagement aimed to gather feedback on the draft Plan from a wide range of affected communities, including community members, Native American Tribes, the technical community, the development community, utility providers, land managers, and the not-for-profit sector.

Phase 3 engagement took place in April and May 2024. During this period, the project team used the following methods to engage the community and gather their input:

- An online survey completed by 464 respondents.
- An online input session with 17 participants.
- Three technical workshops with a total of 41 attendees.
- Additional feedback collected through webpages, emails and letters.

These engagement activities were promoted through social media, newsletters, community events and direct emails, reaching thousands of community members. Overall, people who shared their feedback during Phase 3 engagement were satisfied with the draft Plan’s content and agreed with its proposed vision, goals, and ‘quick start’ actions. There were also concerns and suggestions for plan changes. The project team will consider all comments, along with input from Council and staff, when finalizing the Urban Forest Plan.

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1 Introduction

Bellingham’s urban forest includes all trees within the city boundary. The City manages several thousand acres of forest and thousands of street trees. As one of 3,600 American cities with Tree City USA status, Bellingham has committed to protecting and caring for the urban forest for generations to come.

The Urban Forest Plan (the Plan) is designed to assess the current state of Bellingham’s urban forest, establish a long-term vision based on the community’s shared values, and outline goals, strategies, and actions necessary to achieve this vision. The plan aims to maintain a healthy and desirable urban forest through well-coordinated, consistent, efficient, and sustainable long-term urban forestry management.

The project team completed the Assessment phase (Phase 1) of the project in 2021. This phase included a detailed analysis of canopy change, forest structure, wildlife corridor, and wildland-urban interface. In 2022, the Community Values phase (Phase 2) focused on extensive community engagement to understand the community’s values, goals, and objectives regarding the management of Bellingham’s urban forest. The Phase 2 results informed the drafting of the Plan (Phase 3). The draft Plan was shared with the community in the spring of 2024. Phase 3 engagement followed the release of the draft Plan and provided community members with an opportunity to review and share feedback on the draft Plan.

This report summarizes the results of the Phase 3 Engagement. The results will inform the finalization of the Plan and prioritization of strategies and actions for implementation. The iterative process helps the Plan reflect community priorities and lays the groundwork for effective urban forest management in Bellingham.



Figure 1 Urban Forest Plan project timeline

2 Overview of the Engagement

This Phase 3 Engagement Summary presents findings from the last round of community engagement. The first opportunity was offered during Phase 2: Community Values in May and June 2022. The second opportunity was delivered during Phase 3: Plan Development in April and May 2024. The City shared information about the opportunities for input with community members, Native American Tribes, the technical community, the development community, utility providers, land managers, and the not-for-profit sector.

Similar to Phase 2, Phase 3 engagement included strategies designed to allow feedback from all affected communities, including typically under-represented and marginalized communities. Strategies intended to achieve this are highlighted in green throughout the report.

2.1 Engagement Opportunities

The public was invited to provide input through an online survey and an online input session. The technical community (including tribe members, professionals, NGOs, and interest groups) was engaged through three in-person technical workshops. Tribes were also offered the opportunity for individual meetings. Details on Phase 3 engagement activities are outlined in Table 1. In addition to these opportunities, some community members provided input by email or letters to Council and city staff.

Table 1 Phase 3 summary of engagement activities

Date	Engagement Activity	Participants
April 15 to May 15, 2024	Online survey Translation or interpretation available upon request and with advance notice.	464 respondents
May 8, 2024	Online evening input session Interpretation available upon request and with advance notice.	17 attendees
April 24, 2024	Technical workshop #1 Interpretation available upon request and with advance notice.	19 attendees
May 13, 2024	Technical workshop #2 Interpretation available upon request and with advance notice.	15 attendees
May 15, 2024	Technical workshop #3 Interpretation available upon request and with advance notice.	7 attendees

2.2 Promotion Methods

From April to May 2024, various promotion methods such as emails, news releases and printed flyers were used to provide:

1. Updates on the Urban Forest Plan’s process
2. An invitation to participate in Phase 3 engagement activities
3. Request for referrals to other who might be interested in the Plan and engagement activities

Similar to Phase 2, Phase 3 engagement included promotion strategies to allow feedback from all affected communities, including typically under-represented and marginalized communities. Methods intended to achieve this are highlighted in green throughout the report.

In total, direct contact was made with over 13,500 people and indirect promotion likely reached many more. Details on these promotion methods are summarized in Table 2.

Table 2 Phase 3 summary of promotion methods (measures to improve equity and access are highlighted in green)

Date	Promotion Methods	Reach of Audience
Online Tools		
April to May, 2024	Social Media posts	Facebook – reached 1,400 people Instagram – reached 1,000 people X/Twitter – reached 271 people
April to May, 2024	Newsletters	Urban Forest Plan newsletter – 231 recipients Public Works external newsletter – 283 recipients Public Works internal newsletter – ~300 recipients Habitat News e-newsletter – 743 recipients Engage Bellingham e-newsletter – 5002 recipients
April to May, 2024	Emails Translation prompt in Mandarin, Spanish, Russian, Vietnamese, Punjabi	893 people who work in sectors related to urban forest. Sectors included: City of Bellingham Staff Whatcom County Staff Washington Department of Natural Resources Staff Washington State Department of Transportation Port of Bellingham Bellingham School District

Date	Promotion Methods	Reach of Audience
		Development Organizations Relevant City Boards and Commissions Neighborhood Associations Not-for-profit Organizations Marginalized Communities Organizations Senior Centers/ Elder Care Communities Outdoor Educators Student Organizations Parent and Teacher Organizations Higher Education Institutions Unhoused Community Service Providers Utility Providers MRSC Roster for Vegetation Maintenance Providers MRSC Roster for Environmental Planning Service Providers MRSC Roster for Electrical Utilities
April to May, 2024	Engage Bellingham webpage City webpage with enabled translation function.	2,354 page Engage Bellingham webpage visits 1,049 City webpage visits
Media Tools		
April 19, 2024, May 3, 2024	News releases by Inside Bellingham Weekly: • Emailed to local media, email subscribers • Posted on all City social media pages	2,189 email subscribers April 19 news release: • Facebook – reached 4,200 people • Instagram – reached 1,700 people • X/Twitter – reached 365 people May 3 news release: • Facebook – reached 12,800 people • Instagram – reached 1,100 people • X/Twitter – reached 268 people

Date	Promotion Methods	Reach of Audience
Printed or In-Person Tools		
April to May, 2024	Flyers with QR code and Spanish translation posted at Whatcom Community College and in all Parks kiosks, multiple City buildings, grocery stores, housing complexes, and activity centers	Unknown
April 19, 2024	Bellingham Regional Chamber of Commerce Leadership Whatcom event -Flyer with QR code and Spanish translation at outreach booth.	34 participants
April 20, 2024	Earth Day outreach event: • Announcement at the volunteer work party • Flyer with QR code and Spanish translation at outreach booth.	130 participants
Formal Tribal Notification and Invitation		
April 2024	Formal notification and invitation to eight Native American Nations and Tribes as Tribal Area of Interest: • Lummi Nation • Nooksack Indian Tribe • Confederated Tribes of the Colville Reservation • Sauk-Suiattle Indian Tribe • Swinomish Indian Tribal Community • Upper Skagit Indian Tribe • Samish Indian Nation • Snoqualmie Indian Tribe	8 letters

3 Who We Heard From

A total of 522 individual comments were shared on the draft Plan during Phase 3 engagement, including 464 survey respondents, 17 attendees at the online input session, and 41 participants at the technical workshops. Additionally, 11 letters from community members and environmental groups, and 20 email correspondences, including several from the Lummi Nation, were submitted to the City as comments on the draft Urban Forest Plan. Thousands of Bellingham residents were made aware of the engagement opportunities through various online and in-person promotions (detailed in Table 2).

Although promotion strategies were designed to facilitate engagement by typically underrepresented and marginalized communities, participation by these communities appears minimal. The results conveyed in this report may not reflect the opinions of these communities.

Survey Respondents | Of the 464 survey respondents:

- 91% lived in Bellingham, distributed throughout all City postal codes.
- 47% resided in postal code 98225. All postal codes were represented by survey participants.
- The most common age bracket was 65-74 years old, represented by 29% of survey participants.
- 83% were homeowners, and 17% rented a home.

Online Input Session Attendees | The 17 participants included residents, park stewards, environmental group members, and students.

Technical Workshop Attendees | Technical workshops were intended for tribes, professionals, NGOs, and interest groups, but all community members were invited to attend. Forty-one participants attended the three workshops hosted on April 24, May 13, and May 15, 2024. Participants represented the tree care and arboriculture, real estate, engineering, land use planning, architecture, construction, and environmental not-for-profit sectors; and the general public.

4 What We Heard

Key findings from Phase 3 engagement are summarized in this section and structured around the following topics:

- Feedback on the Urban Forest Plan
- Urban forest vision
- Urban forest target
- Goals and strategies
- ‘Quick start’ actions
- General comments

4.1 Feedback on the Urban Forest Plan

4.1.1 Survey results

Of those who chose to take the survey, 64% of respondents had reviewed the draft Urban Forest Plan prior to taking the survey. Overall, they were satisfied with the quality of the content (Figure 2). Most respondents strongly or somewhat agreed that they understood the content well (94%), found the data and metrics clear (88%), and learned new information about the urban forest (88%). Additionally, 65% agreed that the draft vision, goals, and targets provided good direction for managing Bellingham’s urban forest, while 35% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed with the draft vision, goals, and targets.

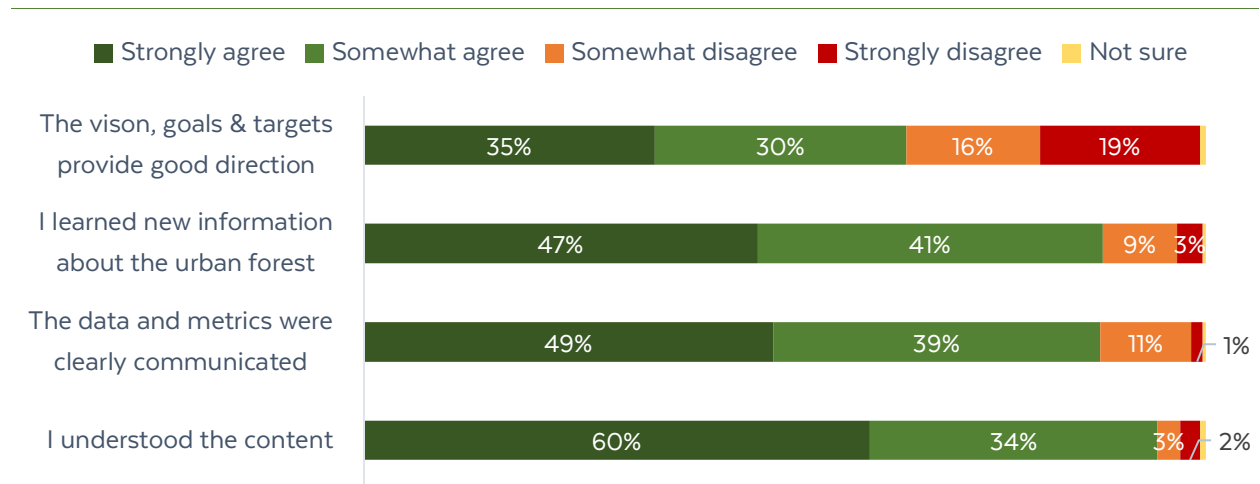


Figure 2 Respondents’ feedback on the draft Urban Forest Plan (total respondents: 297)

A total of 153 respondents shared detailed feedback on why they disagreed with the draft vision, goals, and targets of the Urban Forest Plan. Many expressed concerns over the feasibility of these goals and targets, given other pressing priorities such as housing affordability. Respondents felt the draft plan did not sufficiently or clearly address these competing priorities. There was a strong sentiment that the protection of mature and healthy trees and forests should be prioritized and that it should be better emphasized in the draft Plan. Some respondents were worried about potential requirements for tree retention and planting on

private properties, which they perceived as interfering with their rights as property owners. Additionally, some participants thought the goals and targets were too vague and lacked critical information, such as funding needs and sources. They also believed that the statistics in the plan could be clearer, with more details on the methodology and data sources.

4.1.2 Technical workshop results and response letters

Some workshop participants were concerned about the balance between tree protection and development. Some suggested that the Plan should provide more clarity on how development and tree actions will interact on a project-specific basis, and more clarity on methodologies for selected metrics, such as the Tree Equity Score. They also wanted to see more content addressing the potential conflict between the Urban Forest Plan and densification/development in Bellingham, and how these conflicts would be managed by the City.

A white paper submitted by the Whatcom Million Trees Project suggested several areas for improvement. These included the need for more specific and measurable actions, multiple canopy targets for sub-areas (instead of a single, citywide target), and improved clarity about canopy cover distribution in the city and its Urban Growth Areas (UGAs), especially to avoid the UGAs' extensive canopy masking challenges or compensating for loss in other city neighborhoods. The paper also called for the inclusion of more cities for canopy cover comparisons because of their usefulness in providing context for Bellingham's current and target canopy cover. Finally, the paper called for more detailed cost estimates, and additional details on the monitoring plan.

4.2 Urban forest vision

DRAFT VISION STATEMENT:

Bellingham’s healthy and resilient urban forest enhances the quality of life for all residents, supports associated ecological functions, and contributes to the climate mitigation and adaptation needs of our entire community.

4.2.1 Survey results

Survey respondents were asked for their input on the draft vision statement. The feedback was largely positive (Figure 5): **73% of respondents agreed** that it captured the essential elements of the urban forest vision, including 47% who strongly agreed with the statement. However, 17% of respondents expressed disagreement with the draft statement, with 10% strongly disagreeing.

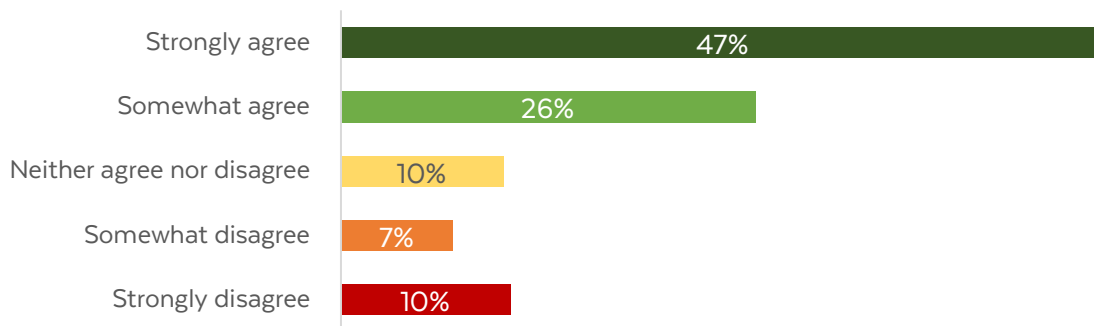


Figure 3 Respondents’ perspective on whether the draft vision statement captures the essential elements for Bellingham’s urban forest (total respondents: 450)

Of the comments provided by 199 survey respondents, several key themes emerged:

- Many participants emphasized the need for a vision that **embraces eco-centric perspectives**, advocating for a deeper recognition of trees as integral components of ecosystems and highlighting the importance of the urban forest in supporting wildlife and ecological connectivity.
- Concerns regarding **tree protection** were prominent, with calls for greater emphasis on protecting large mature trees to fulfill the vision of a resilient urban forest. However, participants also raised the importance of balancing environmental conservation with urban development and addressing **trade-offs between the urban forest and housing needs**.
- Respondents raised issues of **equity, diversity, and inclusion**, expressing worries about the unequal distribution of the urban forest’s benefits and the influence of a minority of stakeholders in shaping the Plan.
- **Governance of trees on private property** was another focal point. Some respondents felt that the City should have no or limited right to govern trees on private properties.

4.2.2 Online input session results

In a poll during the online session, **57% of participants agreed** that the vision statement was a good representation of Bellingham’s urban forest ambitions, while 43% thought some important components were missing. Two participants shared detailed comments on how to further improve the draft vision statement, highlighting the need to include mental and physical health benefits of trees to the community, as well as the role of the urban forest in supporting biodiversity.

4.3 Urban forest target

The draft Plan suggests a target to increase the canopy cover from 40% to 45% by 2050 (excluding the Urban Growth Area).

4.3.1 Survey results

Of the individuals who took the survey, **73% of survey respondents agreed** with the 45% canopy cover target, while 21% disagreed. Among the 114 respondents who commented on the target, some reiterated concerns about the potential impacts of increasing tree canopy on other pressing priorities, such as housing affordability and job security, as well as the financial burdens to the City and homeowners to maintain more trees. Some respondents expressed worries about how this target might affect their rights to manage trees on their properties. Several of them also felt that the canopy target of 45% was insufficient to provide necessary climate benefits by 2050.

4.3.2 Online input session results

During the online input session, two of the 17 participants advocated for a canopy target higher than 45%, considering the urgency of the climate change crisis facing the community. Some participants raised questions about the implementation details to achieve the target, while others identified potential planting locations, such as street right-of-way, parks, and school yards.

4.3.3 Technical workshop results

Technical workshop participants suggested providing more context on the actual increase in canopy needed to achieve the 45% target, considering anticipated tree loss and removals in the coming years.

4.4 Urban forest goals

The draft Plan outlines six proposed goals to help achieve the urban forest vision. These goals cover various aspects of urban forest planning and management, such as tree planting, tree care, and stakeholder partnerships (Figure 4).



Figure 4 Draft goals in the Urban Forest Plan

4.4.1 Survey results

Overall, survey participants demonstrated strong support for the suggested goals (Figure 5). **At least 71% of the respondents strongly supported each goal.**

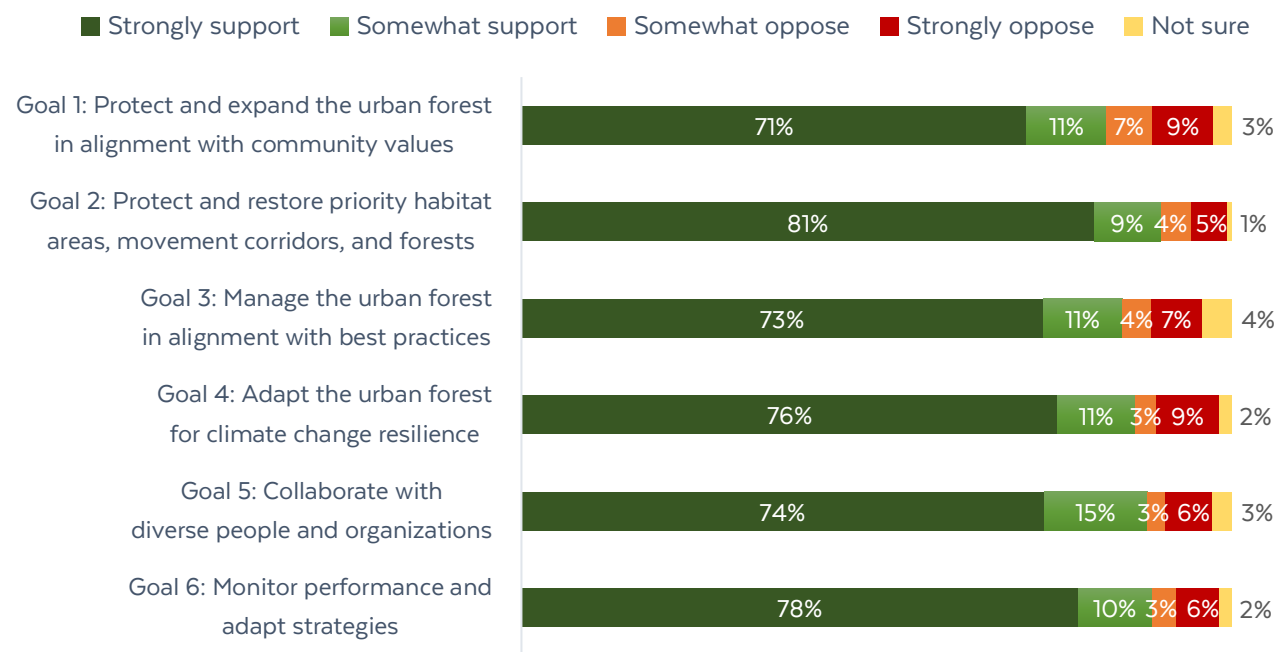


Figure 5 Survey respondents' support for the draft goals (total respondents: 458)

4.4.2 Online input session results

In a poll hosted during the online session, seven participants shared their priorities for the proposed urban forest goals (Figure 6). Three out of seven participants considered Goal 1 and Goal 5 high priorities, while Goal 6 ranked the lowest.

Participants also provided detailed comments on the proposed goals, advocating for enhanced tree protection and planting measures. Several emphasized the importance of partnering with schools for tree planting and monitoring to encourage community involvement and education. Some participants also expressed concerns about the potential impact of increased tree protection measures on view corridors.

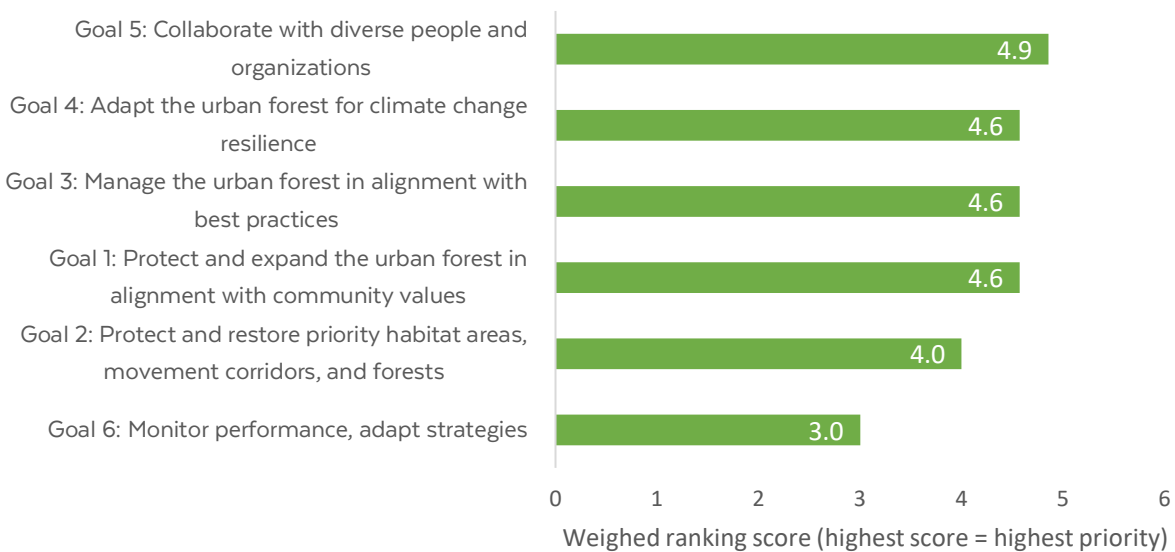


Figure 6 Perceived priority of the proposed urban forest goals (total respondents: 7)

4.4.3 Technical workshop results

Technical workshop participants recommended including actions to manage fire risk under Goal 3, if such actions were not already included. They also suggested areas where the City could engage with community members for input:

- Types of measurement as an accurate measure of success (goal 6)
- Organizations to engage and partner with (goal 5)
- Best practices to manage the urban forest (goal 3)
- Priority habitat areas for protection and restoration (goal 2)
- Values that are important to community members (goal 1)

4.5 ‘Quick start’ actions

The draft Urban Forest Plan’s vision and goals are supported by an action plan to guide its implementation. There are 74 proposed actions embedded under the six proposed goals. Six actions have been prioritized as ‘quick start’ actions to initiate the plan’s implementation. Survey participants indicated their levels of support towards these ‘quick start’ actions (Figure 7). These proposed ‘quick start’ actions, sorted from strongest to lowest support, include:

- Action 18. Develop a Tree Incentive Program (i.e. Tree Coupon Program) to support property owners and renters, particularly in low tree equity areas, to plant and care for trees on private property or streets (goal 1)
- Action 33. Evaluate appropriate staffing needs to support planting, protecting and proactively maintaining Bellingham’s urban forest (goal 3)
- Action 58. Develop a communications and engagement strategy to guide the development of education materials and stewardship programming, with efforts targeted at increasing canopy cover in neighborhoods with low tree equity (goal 5)
- Action 31. Develop an annual urban forestry operations budget (goal 3)
- Action 30. Create an Urban Forester position to lead implementation, establish an Urban Forestry department, and consider adding an interdepartmental staff position to support grant applications, deliverables and budgets (goal 3)
- Action 4. Evaluate codes to enhance urban forest protection and introduce an Exceptional Tree Ordinance (i.e. the Landmark Tree Ordinance) (goal 1)

All actions were supported by the majority of respondents. Action 18, which aims to develop a tree incentive program for private properties, received the most support (by 87% of respondents). At the other end of the spectrum, Action 4, centering on tree protection codes, was supported by 75% of respondents.

At the time of the Phase 3 engagement and associated survey, the City had already begun implementing and promoting Action 18. Tree Incentive Program (i.e. Community Trees Program). In addition, due in part to comments received during the Phase 3 engagement, the City enacted an emergency interim Landmark Tree Ordinance (Action 4) on May 20, 2024. The emergency interim ordinance establishes a landmark tree inventory, a permitting process for removal, and a larger fine for illegal removal.

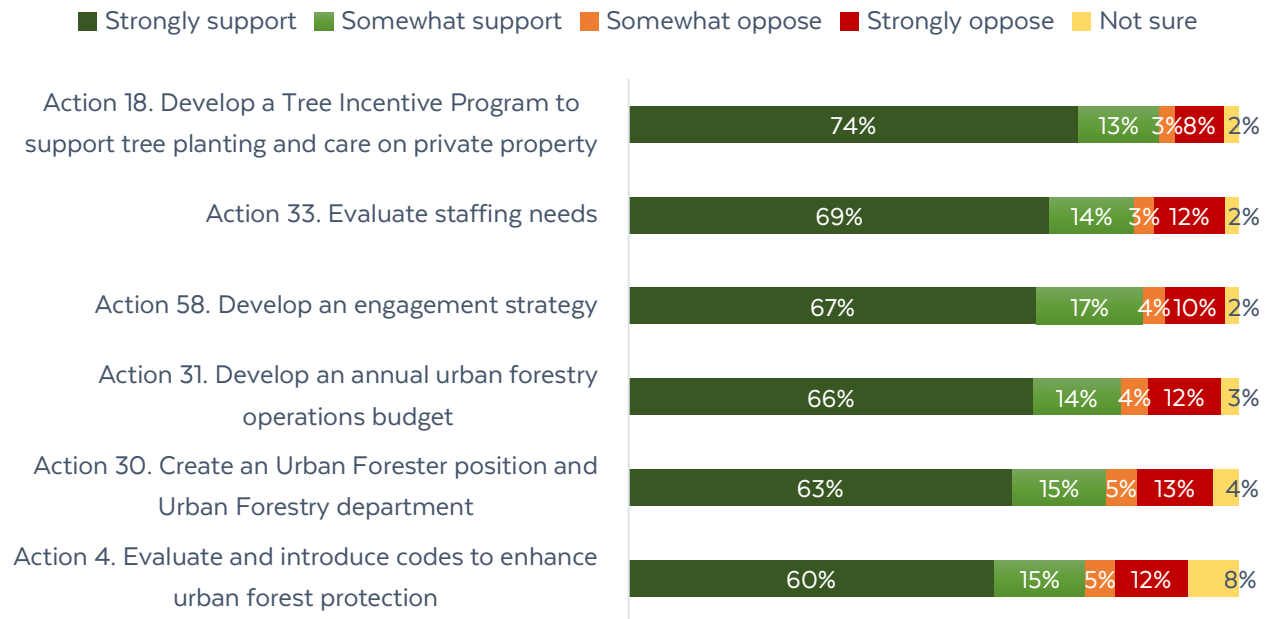


Figure 7 Survey respondents' support for the draft 'quick start' actions (total respondents: 463)

A total of 222 respondents shared detailed comments and suggestions on the 'quick start' actions. Many emphasized the urgency of Action 4, calling for immediate measures to protect mature and old growth trees, particularly on development sites. Some respondents suggested expanding Action 18 to include more engagement and stewardship measures, such as incentive planting programs for homeowners and businesses. Planting native species and enhancing species diversity were highlighted by some participants as additional priority actions to support biodiversity and enhance urban forest resilience.

4.6 Additional feedback

Technical workshop participants and other community members shared a wide array of comments on the Urban Forest Plan through written and verbal notes during workshops, Engage Bellingham, emails, and letters. These comments covered several key areas:

- Public process:** Participants stressed the importance of open discussion and consultation before decision-making. They suggested that the Plan follow the State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) process and make foundational documents publicly available for transparency. A few participants also emphasized the need to involve tree care providers throughout the process, rather than solely during the final stage.
- Implementation of the Plan:** Questions were raised regarding the implementation details, such as the implementation cost/budget, and the proposed Landmark Tree Ordinance (e.g., applicability and exemptions). Some participants suggested that the City provide a detailed cost analysis on the

"We are beyond fortunate to live here primarily BECAUSE of our trees and natural beauty so please act like you REALLY mean it and act boldly and bravely. <3"

– Survey respondent

implementation plan and raised concerns about the cost of actions like the creation of an incentive program, increases in staffing, and increases in City tree maintenance.

- **Integration with other strategic plans and processes:** Participants highlighted the need to document the City’s compliance and connection with other strategic plans, such as the Washington State Growth Management Act, Bellingham Comprehensive Plan, Climate Action Plan, and Lake Whatcom Management Program Work Plan. They also hoped to see specific language added to other strategic plans to support the implementation of the Plan.
- **Balancing priorities:** Another common theme was the challenges related to achieving a balance between increasing tree canopy and addressing housing affordability. The Whatcom Housing Alliance (WHA) expressed concerns about the Plan’s implications on housing costs, emphasizing the need to address these competing priorities. The Lummi Nation raised questions about the potential archaeological impacts of projects stemming from the Plan.
- **Metrics and methods:** Participants called for more detailed metrics, such as canopy cover per land use, to help identify areas most in need of planting. They requested more transparency regarding the assumptions behind canopy projections, as well as the impacts of planting assumptions on residential, commercial, and industrial land development (e.g., the number of residential units being impacted or taken out for tree planting). One former Chuckanut Community Forest Park District Commission member renewed a Phase 1 comment that the existing conditions reports were flawed.
- **Additional actions to consider in the Plan:** Participants proposed several specific actions and called for immediate and meaningful actions rather than deferring the decisions to later (as currently stated in the action plan). The proposed actions are listed below:
 - Adopt tree canopy target by land use or development type, instead of a single overall target of 45%.
 - Some called for a canopy target higher than 45%.
 - A few participants proposed to set up canopy targets for at-risk inner neighborhoods.
 - One participant noted that different tree species could have similar canopy spreads but varying canopy volumes and that as a result, the 45% target might be achieved while the canopy volume decreases.
 - Introduce stronger measures beyond the Landmark Tree Ordinance (i.e. Exceptional Tree Ordinance) to ensure the retention and protection of mature trees while providing flexibility to allow the removal of unhealthy and hazardous trees. Examples include:
 - Enact a tree removal permit applicable to all properties in Bellingham.
 - Establish a Mature Tree Retention Policy for new developments.

“Stop getting in the way of reasonable housing development. Not all trees should be held to the same standard. A large Alder, for example, is near the end of its life cycle. Protecting trees that naturally have limited life spans doesn’t make sense. That is just creating future falling hazards down the road.”

– Survey respondent

- Require retention of ‘net metabolizer’ trees, defined based on diameter at breast height (DBH) on a species-by-species basis as a proxy for tree age/maturity.
- Require appropriate protection of retained trees during construction.
- Provide updated and clear guidance on tree care, including species-specific limits on crown removal.
- Establish a low-density residential tree retention formula.
- Introduce measures to guide tree planting and replacement of removed trees.
 - Priority planting areas suggested by participants included inner neighborhoods impacted by urban heat islands, neighborhoods within the Lake Whatcom watershed, along freeway, and West Street in Columbia Neighborhood.
 - Introduce requirements for permeable surfaces near trees and in parking strips to support better planting results.
 - Prioritize large and non-invasive species along streets.
 - Focus on educating property owners to encourage tree planting.
 - Establish standards regarding replacement tree planting and care.
 - Amend the Infill Toolkit’s green factor calculation to support planting and other goals.
 - Require trees on all rental properties.
 - Implement tree-friendly road and street tree designs.
 - Establish an enforcement plan for codes relevant to tree retention or replacement.
 - Establish a banned plant list to avoid problematic species.
- Require involvement of qualified professionals, such as ISA-certified arborists, for tree care, planting, inspection, inventory, and retention/removal decisions.
 - Establish a tree service provider registration system.
 - Have an on-call TRAQ arborist for imminent risk trees in addition to conducting preventative tree removals.
- Introduce more education and stewardship programs to support the implementation of the Plan, such as setting up a hyper-local neighborhood engagement program.
- Include Firewise best practices in the Plan to minimize forest fire risks. This could involve requiring tree removal requests to be reviewed and approved by a TRAQ arborist to manage fire fuel levels.

5 Synthesis of Feedback

The feedback collected during Phase 3 engagement shows overall satisfaction with the content of the draft Plan and agreement with the proposed vision, goals, and ‘quick start’ actions. However, there were also common concerns and many suggestions for plan changes. The project team will consider all comments, along with input from Council and staff, when finalizing the Urban Forest Plan.

Appendices

The following appendices are available in a separate document:

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